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Riots

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RIOTS. Though they usually involve spontaneous, wanton violence or disorder by an anonymous crowd, riots have also served as a noteworthy form of social protest in American history. While the American Revolution made popular revolt a “quasi-legitimate” aspect of American culture, the ideals of democracy privilege debate and representation over mob rule. Nevertheless, Americans have frequently brought disorder to the nation’s streets to express opinions and demands. Crowds have sought to limit the rights of others as often as they have demanded equal rights. Riots are not by definition part of organized rebellions, but they sometimes occur when public demonstrations turn to physical violence.



Rioting in the Nation's Capital. Troops stand guard at a street in Washington, D.C., in April 1968; the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on 4 April sparked riots nationwide, but the worst was in Washington, where thousands of people were arrested, hundreds of buildings were destroyed, and some areas were left devastated for decades. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

In the eighteenth century the American British colonies were frequently places of riot and protest against the British government. The Boston Massacre in 1770 is perhaps the most famous of the prerevolutionary civil disturbances. A riot erupted when a sailor named Crispus Attucks and a group of Boston artisans and sailors provoked British soldiers who they felt were taking the jobs of local workers. The uprising ended with British soldiers firing into a crowd of colonials, an incident that galvanized many against Britain's forceful rule over the colonies.

Once the United States became a sovereign country, it was forced to contend with riots directed against its own state and its citizens. The 1820s and 1830s were perhaps the most riot-filled decades of American history. Ethnic groups, mostly African and Irish Americans, became targets for others who sought to protect their jobs and social lives from incursions of immigrant and "non-white" Americans, as in the 1838 antiabolitionist riots in Philadelphia.

In July 1863 white and mostly poor workers throughout the country led demonstrations against the mandatory drafting of soldiers for the Civil War. Though the ability of the rich to buy soldier replacements was a major impetus for revolt, many demonstrators were protesting be-

ing forced to fight for the freedom of black slaves. Most dramatically, the demonstrations led to assaults on Republican Party representatives and African Americans in New York City. Five days of violence destroyed hundreds of homes and churches and led to the deaths of 105 people. The civil disturbance ended only when soldiers just returning from the battlefields of Gettysburg could muster the power to retake the city from the mob.

Intra-ethnic group conflict sometimes led to rioting as well, and in 1871, Irish Catholics and Protestants clashed over a religious conflict in New York City. That riot resulted in more than sixty deaths and over a hundred injuries when national guardsmen opened fire on the crowd. The battle among Irish Americans helped to stoke nativism in the city and throughout the nation.

Riots can also occur without a specific reason or disagreement. In 1919 Boston became enflamed when people used a policemen's strike as an opportunity for extensive criminal activity, such as robbery, stoning striking policemen, and other kinds of assaults. Highlighting the city's deep divisions, middle- and upper-class Bostonians formed vigilante posses to battle the rioters. The three-day period of chaos ended with eight deaths and dozens

of injuries, many of which resulted from state guardsmen shooting into crowds of civilians. General public opinion was against the riots, and the court dealt harshly with the few rioters who were caught.

Though the end of World War I and the summer immediately following it saw racially motivated riots in East St. Louis and Chicago, Illinois, and Washington, D.C., and 1943 saw terrible bloodshed in Harlem and Detroit, the 1960s was the decade with the most widespread and pervasive race riots. Cities all over the country exploded with conflict between white and black citizens, from Harlem (1964) to Watts (1965), to Chicago and Cleveland (1966), to Newark and Detroit (1967), and finally to Washington, D.C. (1968). Unlike the earlier period of race riots, those in the 1960s involved mostly African Americans as white people fled the inner cities. Responding to the rhetoric of the Black Power Movement, desperation from the waning CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, economic deprivation, and, most importantly, the racism of whites in their cities, African Americans rose up to assert their rights as citizens and humans. The American Indian Movement had similar motivation in 1969 for its protests, most notably at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota. In late June and early July of the same year, gay and lesbian protesters in New York City responded to homophobic raids by police with a riot at the Stonewall, a bar in Greenwich Village. Though many disowned the violence and chaos of the Stonewall Riots, the incident helped to insert gay rights into the national political agenda.

Major politically motivated riots also occurred, most notably those that protested the war in Vietnam. In the summer of 1968 civil rights and antiwar protesters joined in a march outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. One reason the civil rights and antiwar movements in the 1960s emphasized nonviolence was to make it more difficult for officials to declare a march or a demonstration a riot. In Chicago, however, city and party officials viewed the march as a potential riot, and Mayor Richard J. Daley sent busloads of police. Protesters and sympathizers described what happened as a police riot, claiming the protest was peaceful and nonviolent until police attacked demonstrators without provocation.

The most deadly prison riot in United States history occurred in 1971 at the state prison at Attica, New York. Like many prisons in the early 1970s, Attica became a riot scene as prisoners protested their treatment at the facility. The state militia used force to retake the prison, leaving in the end thirty-two inmates and eleven guards dead. All but four of the dead were killed by the militia.

Riots in the late twentieth century seemed especially senseless, partially because television coverage allowed many to view the chaos as it was happening. When Los Angeles went up in flames in April 1992, the riot was ostensibly caused by the acquittal of the white police officers accused of beating an African American, Rodney King, a year earlier. After five days of violence following

the verdict, 54 people were dead, more than 2,000 others were injured, and property losses had reached approximately \$900 million. Black-white racism seemed to lie at the heart of the controversy. However, Hispanic Americans were the largest group of rioters, and Korean-owned businesses were the most common target of vandals and looters. Many have asserted that these rioters were responding to economic, political, and social deprivation similar to that which led to the rioting in the 1960s. In the years following the riots, the Los Angeles Police Department underwent a massive review and changed many of its procedures regarding both arrests and riot control.

Looting became a common part of modern riots, as evidenced in Los Angeles and by the outbreak of mob violence at the World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in Seattle, Washington, in November and December 1999. Though peaceful demonstrators were on hand for the annual WTO meeting to protest numerous issues—from environmentalism to animal rights—a fringe group of youth activists espousing anarchism smashed storefront windows and spray-painted graffiti in the downtown area. A new element of protest was introduced in the Seattle riots when the Internet was used to call thousands to the city and spread the anarchistic gospel of the rioters. And as in the case of Los Angeles, millions throughout the world were able to watch the riots as they were happening, amplifying their affect on policy as well as the number of people offended by the violence. Random civil disorder has had a long but uneasy relationship with political, economic, and social protest in the nation's history, but it is certainly a relationship that continues to be a part of the functioning American republic.

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See also **Civil Disobedience; Class Conflict; Race Relations.**